

FACT SHEET 3

Communicating with People with Disabilities



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Communicating with People with Disabilities

Employees or customers who have disabilities will feel most comfortable at your place of business if you consider these suggestions for effective communication

General Considerations

- Do not be afraid to make a mistake when meeting and communicating with someone with a disability. Try following the suggestions below. Imagine how *you* would react if you were in similar situations. Keep in mind that a person who has a disability is a person, and, like you, is entitled to the dignity, consideration, respect, and rights you expect for yourself.
- Treat adults as adults. Address people with disabilities by their first names only when extending the same familiarity to all others present. (Never patronize people by patting them on the head or shoulder.)
- Relax. If you don't know what to do, allow the person who has a disability to put you at ease.
- If you offer assistance and the person declines, do not insist. If it is accepted, ask how you can best help, and follow directions. Do not take over.
- If someone with a disability is accompanied by another individual, address the person with a disability directly rather than speaking through the other person.

"People First" Terminology

- Place the person before the disability. Say "person with a disability" rather than "disabled person."
- Avoid referring to people by the disability they have, i.e., "an epileptic," "blind people." A person is not a condition.

Rather, refer to "a person with epilepsy," or "people who are blind."

- People are not "bound" or "confined" to wheelchairs. They use them to increase their mobility and enhance their freedom. It is more accurate to say "wheelchair user" or "person who uses a wheelchair."

Physical Disabilities

- Do not make assumptions about what a person can and cannot do. A person with a physical disability is the best judge of his or her own capabilities.
- Do not push a person's wheelchair or grab the arm of someone walking with difficulty, without first asking if you can be of assistance. Personal space includes a person's wheelchair, crutches, or other mobility aid.
- Never move someone's crutches, walker, cane, or other mobility aid without permission.
- When speaking to a person using a wheelchair for more than a few minutes, try to find a seat for yourself so the two of you are at eye level.

Visual Disabilities

- Identify yourself when you approach a person who is blind. If a new person approaches, introduce him or her.

- It is appropriate to touch the person's arm lightly when you speak so that he or she knows you are speaking to him or her.
- Face the person and speak directly to him or her. Use a normal tone of voice.
- Don't leave without saying you are leaving.
- If you are offering directions, be as specific as possible, and point out obstacles in the path of travel. Use clock cues ("The door is at 2 o'clock").
- Alert people who are blind or visually impaired to posted information.
- Never pet or otherwise distract a guide dog unless the owner has given you permission.
- You may offer assistance if it seems needed, but if your offer is declined, do not insist. If your offer is accepted, ask the person how you can best help.

Hearing Disabilities

- Ask the person how he or she prefers to communicate.
- If you are speaking through an interpreter, remember that the interpreter may lag a few words behind especially if there are names or technical terms to be fingerspelled so pause occasionally to allow him or her time to translate completely and accurately.
- Talk directly to the person who is deaf or hard of hearing, not to the interpreter. However, although it may seem awkward to you, the person who is deaf or hard of hearing will look at the interpreter and may not make eye contact with you during the conversation.

- Before you start to speak, make sure you have the attention of the person you are addressing. A wave, a light touch on the shoulder, or other visual or tactile signals are appropriate ways of getting the person's attention.
- Speak in a clear, expressive manner. Do not over-enunciate or exaggerate words.
- Unless you are specifically requested to do so, do not raise your voice. Speak in a normal tone; do not shout.
- To facilitate speechreading, face into the light, and keep your hands and other objects away from your mouth.
- If the person is speechreading, face the person directly and maintain eye contact. Don't turn your back or walk around while talking. If you look away, the person might assume the conversation is over.
- While you are writing a message for someone who is deaf or hard of hearing, don't talk, since the person cannot read your note and your lips at the same time.
- If you do not understand something that is said, ask the person to repeat it or to write it down. The goal is communication; do not pretend to understand if you do not.
- If you know any sign language, try using it. It may help you communicate, and it will at least demonstrate your interest in communicating and your willingness to try.

Speech Disabilities

- Talk to people with speech disabilities as you would talk to anyone else.
- Be friendly; start up a conversation.
- Be patient; it may take the person a while to answer.

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- Give the person your undivided attention.
- Ask the person for help in communicating with him or her. If the person uses a communication device such as a manual or electronic communication board, ask the person how best to use it.
- Speak in your regular tone of voice.
- Tell the person if you do not understand what he or she is trying to say. Ask the person to repeat the message, spell it, tell you in a different way, or write it down.
- To obtain information quickly, ask short questions that require brief answers or a head nod. However, try not to insult the person's intelligence with over-simplification.

Cognitive Disabilities

- Treat adults with cognitive disabilities as adults.
- When speaking to someone who has a cognitive disability, try to be alert to their responses so that you can adjust your method of communication if necessary. For example, some people may benefit from simple, direct sentences or from supplementary visual forms of communication, such as gestures, diagrams, or demonstrations.
- Use language that is concrete rather than abstract. Be specific, without being too simplistic. Using humor is fine, but do not interpret a lack of response as rudeness. Some people may not grasp the meaning of sarcasm or other subtleties of language.
- People with brain injuries may have short-term memory deficits and may repeat themselves or require information to be repeated.

- People with auditory perceptual problems may need to have directions repeated, and may take notes to help them remember directions or the sequence of tasks. They may benefit from watching a task demonstrated.
- People with perceptual or "sensory overload" problems may become disoriented or confused if there is too much to absorb at once. Provide information gradually and clearly. Reduce background noise if possible.
- Repeat information using different wording or a different communication approach if necessary. Allow time for the information to be fully understood.
- Don't pretend to understand if you do not. Ask the person to repeat what was said.
- In conversation, people with mental retardation may respond slowly, so give them time. Be patient, flexible, and supportive.
- Some people who have a cognitive disability may be easily distracted. Try not to interpret distraction as rudeness.
- Do not expect all people to be able to read well. Some people may not read at all.

Please note: This material is based in part on *Achieving Physical and Communication Accessibility*, a publication of the National Center for Access Unlimited, and *Community Access Facts*, an Adaptive Environments Center publication.